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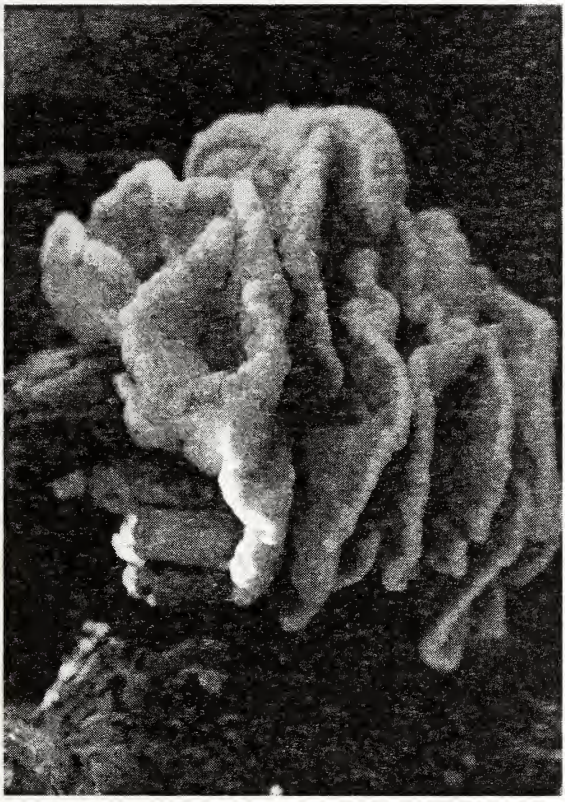
Mount Voices

A Journal of Poetry and Prose



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Foreword

Whether with the scratch of pencil on paper or the bursting tap of fingers on keyboard, writing is release, from the exorcisms that we ink on to our own journal pages and the slow laborings that poetry is birthed from, to the characters that wrest themselves, full grown, from our split skulls. In this release, we often seek to throw off some burden, the weight of regret or of grief, or to finally pot the seedling of a poem or story that's germinated long enough. Or we write out of need, becuase what's been turning in our heads demands expression, a framework, to be given to the rest of the world. We read out of the same reasons, for some escape, in the plot twists of a detective novel or for the communion we find when some truth jumps from the page it's been written, the phrases that weaken our breath, cause us to start, to go back and read again and again because there it is, said so perfectly. This moment is why I read, whether it comes when reading Irving's *The World According to Garp* - "Garp drank the beer and wondered if everything was an anti-climax" - or Lynn Tanner's "Corazon" - "Two years out of the cloister, two years as a spiritual advisor, six months of that time spent on death row, Miguel had seen many eyes filled with despair, with anger, and when a man was in his final moments, eyes filled with fear, tinged with either acquiescence or defiance to the inevitable." As with all good writing, in each of this journal's works, there is some truth to be found, and the communion of reader and writer pulses.

- Amanda Prince

Poetry

Poetry

Learning the Names of God

how the pattern
reveals
itself
to the weaver
stacking one thread
across another

how the song lifts
the voice distinct
particular, but just
flecks of data on
a piece of metal

how the hyacinth
bursts in time, and always
skyward

don't show me the man
behind the curtain
I live
by the daily miracles
the small silver key
whose turn
astonishing
fires the engine.

Love, Death and Miscellaneous Abstractions

1
Between our skins, hundreds of miles, hundreds
of dangers. Your possible deaths
pry apart my hours.

2
It's the light-switch
effect I can't stand. Death walks in
flicks the lever
and that's it. No
argument, no do-overs.

3
You can't use two abstractions in one
poem, the Teacher decrees. Choose
one. Does she really think
Death and Love are abstractions?
God! (Another abstraction, she snaps.)

4
If by a pen stroke
Death could be rendered an abstraction,
wouldn't everyone be a poet?

5
Oh Great Abstraction,
take this concrete fact
and remake it in your image:
elusive, removed, blessedly
intangible.

Bright June

Elysium, angel-wings know more
Than I, bereaved: dead to the eye, the hand
At waking hour, gone from touch, door
To living. Mother of common blood, in land
Of poetry, you wear a gown of pearl,
Await bridegroom, prince of peace. Mistress
Of time, concubine, I weep, girl
Of isolation, unwed. In orphan dress
Tattered with love, adorned with patches of care,
I surrender to absent arms, wishes rent.
Aged in a day, dully weary and bare,
I pray for the flowers of noon: stylus bends
In dark night to fashion pictures of you
And me as we were, we two, in bright June.

Evening Serenade

Mute flowers of the heart charm a bride
Of lasting grave. Leaves of love rustle in
Sheer light, shine like flames ablaze, abide
Tough life is still. Face to face, she wins
A vision as we darkly look through glass.
Hour of painful birth is past: the time
For death has come, for lyrics beneath the grass.
Mother--flutesong, magic poet's rhyme,
Evening serenade--gestures now
In silent tomb. Shimmerings of laughter fade:
Eye glimmers no more. On wide water prow
Sails toward final rest, in bright shade,
Blessed long ago. Morning and night she sought
The wine of love: on crystal door she knocks.

Jewel

The other side, irresistible,
Teases behind the wall, wildly forges
One final truth, invincible.
Glory of the sunflower gorges
Daylight in garden of remembrance:
Death struck irrefutable, majestic,
Smote clean the neck and tongue, kindly lanced
Boil of life (pure and sharp), sick
With ease. Time took her fee: golden witch
Shrieked like the eagle at midnight. Mother
Responded, broken child of hours, rich
With living. Gilded moments lie in treasure,
Buried beneath the grass forever now:
Heart-coin of sorrow, red jewel, I bestow.

I dedicate these sonnets in loving memory of my mother, Gladys Trace, who died on January 2, 2002. My mother was a consummate poet and a true spiritual guide.

Your Face

more like hers than mine
but that's fine
When yelled at I see me plenty.

the shaking hands.
like leaves or rattlesnake
with red cheeks clenched teeth and dark eyes

So I stop with admonishments
turn over to warnings.
Don't be the me we've seen
be the me buried alive.

shout back.
swing fists.
when those muscles go unused
you die.

Waiting For Barbie

To hell with you, math boy!
Calculating hearts like factoring a polynomial.
With your towering frame
it must be so easy to
look down your nose.
Commenting on women
as though watching a parade,
or a duck-shoot.
"That one has a nice rack. That one isn't very tone. She's got a hot body but she's ugly. Her thighs are too jiggly. There's not enough junk in her trunk and that one's got too much."

Yes, you have amazing eyes
and you're a fine lookin' piece of manhood.
But you laugh and tell me
That "hittin' it" with these girls is
"sooooo easy".
Also that men and women
cannot be friends because one of them
always wants to hit the sheets.
Behind that smile lies a man
who believes that women are
less aware than men,
because they are always looking to
some man to save them.
You made me aware
that a nice guy can still
be a pig.
You probably do a dust check
with a white glove
and want love only from a
flawless Barbie doll.

So go ahead
and put every woman you meet under
that high powered skeptical microscope.
When you meet Barbie
I hope she plays you like Scrabble,
makes you her footstool,
sucks all your blood out and
leaves you for dead.

Where the Tracks Lie

The soul is a tangible thing.
It's borders
boundaries
impact and substance
all make themselves known
through the way that this hurt
sits inside a body.

The soul, surely
is where the tracks lie.
Marking the change,
the evolution of a child
into something wiser than human and alien
to this carnival of strangers.
The spiritual record book
of the pounds of flesh
and gallons of blood
given as gifts.

Must be,
because this hurt
is so much more than the heart.
It is pulled by
the magnetic thick power of memory

to move blood
against the grain.
Reminding you that you just saw
the last
of a very rare thing.
Bringing you back to a time
where you were tumbling
free and calm
in the middle of something natural
that surrounded you,
penetrated and commanded you,
called you
and calls you again.

All Night Newsstand

Wolves eat the bodies of dead soldiers
then wash them down with cheap wine.

Decrepit ancestors of civilizations sip their beer
and watch on big screen televisions.

I wander the streets of Tokyo
looking for a neon drawing of a naked girl
with blinking nipples.

On the ocean outside the harbor
ships toss and turn at their anchors
while sailors on watch grip the
icy handrails and gaze at the
distant lights.

A man in a heavy overcoat buys a
paper at an all night newsstand and
stuffs it under his arm. He turns up
his collar against the damp night
air and heads down the narrow street.

There is no traffic but in the dark
the traffic lights continue in their
rhythmic cycle from green to yellow to
red then back to green
and the crossing signs say
wait...walk...wait...walk...
wait...

Not Sleepy

I face the executioner with a smile.
I'm ready to lose my head, go on take it.

Rescuers hover overhead, lower a basket,
lift me up and out of there, ferry me to
a field hospital where I lie in bed all day
drinking Piña Coladas and watching old movies.
What's wrong with that?

Earlier I was late for supper, so I grew antennae on my head
and watched local television as it appeared behind my eyes.
I pretty much saw everything as if it were a television show
interrupted by commercials.

I saw her standing on the cliff looking out to sea.
When I approached she raised her hand to stop me.
I stood still as she leaned forward and fell toward the water
and the rocks below, but then she was flying, rising up,
floating above the waves.

My eyelids drifted downward but I kept writing.
It was a hard thing not to want to continue,
see what would happen next--
a Chinese girl in her underwear, a pomegranate,
an alabaster statue, a zither,
a peace pipe, a walrus, a crochet needle,
a wrinkled napkin.

No Place is Perfect

If we don't like it here,
let's go somewhere...
to Ladakh,
I've heard of it but haven't a clue.

Or to Burma, it has a famous road,
or to Pittsburgh.
It stinks. But no place is perfect
and we're looking for somewhere else to be
such as Easter Island.
Lonely place, all those stone heads
staring out to sea,
waiting for what?

Let's go to Siam.
We can do the polka,
you in your hoopskirt and gold brocade.
Or to Miami,
baggy shorts pink socks white shoes
and a blue shirt covered with orchids.

Maybe it's not so bad here.
Maybe we should
go outside in our underwear
and pee off the porch
and look at the Big Dipper.

Amanda Prince

Sunburnt

I came home today
to you, to write
in from the passing glances and
the speckling rain,
each step
more hurried than the last.
To throw off my water-stained jacket and take up this pen
as though it were the body of
my lover
who has left me
whose body was mine
inside the heated womb
of the boat's berth. We
with our gaspings, teeth crushing
windpipe my tongue
to butter your belly palms
melded to hold out
'til the last, never fearing
the jesting end
would come to drool and
whimper before you
and me while we burnt
in our finery
between the ocean and the sun.

Prose

The Doctor Will Spray You Now

I have an appointment with a Native American shaman called Jasper who is supposed to rid me of "spritual parasites." He lives in Sedona, Arizona, and he travels around the country performing parasite removal rituals. As far as I can tell, he's the mystical equivalent of the Orkin man.

According to Jasper, most of us are infected with non-corporeal entities that sap our life force and compel us to behave badly. I'm enervated and cranky at times, but I've never attributed my funkier states of being to spiritual parasites. Nevertheless, I'm always looking for shortcuts to greater health and happiness, so I've decided to give this guy a shot.

I'm driving across Topanga Canyon from the San Fernando Valley to Malibu. The sunlight streaks through the low branches of the eucalyptuses and the live oaks, striping the two-lane black top with gold. I curl up the mountain--an old hill in the Santa Monica range that's been worn down by weather, Native Americans, Spaniards, livestock, ranchers, movie cowboys, hippies, and most recently, refugees from the sprawl of L.A. proper and the Valley.

The road follows a dry creek bed on the downhill side, and I sway with the centrifugal force of the car as it rounds the curves of the canyon. Two minutes from the Pacific Coast Highway (Angelenos measure distance in driving time), I catch the seaweedy scent of the ocean, and then, wham! There's the shimmering Santa Monica Bay, spread out before me like an IMAX film.

My friend, Hannah, is in my passenger seat. "Why are we doing this? This is really stupid, isn't it?" she asks. We both crack up. She's a large black woman -- not fat, but what my grandma would have called "healthy." Her laughter sounds like a

cannon firing. The sound is so full and uninhibited, it makes me laugh even harder.

If we weren't in this together, neither Hannah nor I would go through with it. My husband should have me committed, and then cut off my access to our bank account, not that I plan to tell him what I'm spending on this adventure. This like spiritual parasite removals are the reason people who don't live here laugh at Southern Californians.

The spiritual parasite theory strikes me as both silly and simplistic, but then again, I don't know how one could prove or disprove it. That's the whole trouble with metaphysics. There aren't any reliable tools--say, a dip stick--to tell you if you're a quart low, spiritually speaking. Ultimately, I decided to spend an evening and $208.00 on this very weird propositions because I want to see a shaman at work. I'll be Lois Lane, or better yet, Margaret Mead. Sure, that's the ticket. This is research.

Maybe this ceremony, whatever it is, will help me shed some pessimism. I'd like to lessen the gravitational pull of my negativity. I don't know if I have more despair, angst, and sorrow than other people, but I certainly experience mine acutely. Frankly, I'd give more than an evening and $208.00 to lighten up. If I do accomplish something tonight, then it's time and money well spent.

We reach Big Rock Drive, turn right, away from the ocean, and wind up a big cliff. The house we seek is a mile up the hill. we spot the address and I let Hannah out of the car. I park around the corner, on a very narrow road lined with bougainvillea vines.

We walk to the front of the house and gape at it for a minute before we approach the gate. The sun, still high in the afternoon sky, is shining directly on this tan, yellow, and orange post-Memphis mansion. The gated, semi-circular driveway is paved with multi-colored, interlocking pieces, and is large enough to accommodate a fleet of cars. The driveway provides a set-back for the house, which sits on a cliff overlooking the bay.

The house has two stories. Big ionic pillars pretend to hold up the entryway and second floor. The building stretches

across the lot like a handsome, tanned beach boy--impressively muscled and compact at the same time. I've seen bigger houses, and more expensive ones, but not on a lot like this. Architecture, personal space, and ocean view make this one outstanding piece of real estate.

Hannah and I look at each other over our dark glasses. Who are the people who live in this house, and why are they hosting a shaman?

There are three people--two women and a very thin man--and a black standard poodle standing in the driveway. The man ambles over and opens a small gate next to the big one meant for cars. His complexion is the color of Elmer's glue.

"Hi, I'm Fred," he says in a barely audible voice.

Hannah and I nod a greeting and walk over to the women. I recognize one of them. Her name is Sheila. I met her ten years ago at some meditation and channeling circles. When I attended those sessions, I always went in my girl reporter mode. The only way I can participate in these things with a straight face is to distance myself mentally. Sheila, on the other hand, seemed fully at home with New Age practices of every kind, accepting every notion from angels to mother ships with no skepticism whatever.

So here she is again. When I first met her, she had recently married a man some thirty years her senior, a very wealthy guy from all accounts. There's something different about her now. She seems, I don't know, looser? Then it dawns on me--the old man must have died. She's a rich widow now, advertising her availability in an orange halter top the size of a napkin.

While making small talk with her, I take inventory of her lopsided face. her right eye and right corner of her mouth droop from a stroke she suffered when she was only twenty-nine. I shade my face with the flat of my hand. The sun is not in my eyes, but I don't want her to know that I can't figure out which of her eyes to look at when I talk to her. They're on such different planes that it has to be one or the other.

I'm thinking that she's a rich Malibu trophy wife who never had to work or struggle, which considering her obvious physical difficulties, is a patently ridiculous notion. Here I am at

this tony spiritual gathering, and already I'm tossing off judgments like a small claims court magistrate. I turn to the other woman and introduce myself.

"Hi, I'm Ann."

"Hi, I'm Lisa. I'm glad you made it."

Lisa is the daughter of the couple who own this house. When I spoke with her on the phone, I thought I was talking to a thirteen-year-old. Lisa is, in fact, thirty-eight. She's medium height, slight of build, and has a soft curtain of chestnut hair that falls to her shoulders. She has Cocker Spaniel eyes, and a high breathy voice.

When she walks, she wobbles as if her balance were off, or her legs were jelly, or both. Something Fred has said--in a voice too muted to carry to the rest of us--makes Lisa laugh. Her laugh is airy and high and comes from her throat, not her gut, like Hannah's. The sound makes me want to pick her up and set her down in a chair. She seems far too fragile to be standing and laughing at the same time.

The conversation flags, so Hannah and I meander around the driveway.

"What's up?" I nod in Lisa's direction.

Hannah tells me that Lisa used to be an executive at one of the studios, maybe Sony. One day she fell down some stairs, bonked her head and damaged her brain. I think of my friend Jan, who damaged her brain when she crashed her motorcycle. Dain bramage, Jan calls it.

"Geez," I say.

"Um hm," Hannah answers as we walk inside.

I enter the foyer and suppress a gasp. The ceiling in the living room must be twenty feet high. The west side of the house is all windows and looks out over the bay. All the doors in the place are made from heavy mahogany planks. The kitchen is tricked out with a high-end appliances. I can't see a lamp cord anywhere, just like the photos in Architectural Digest.

Ever since my husband and I renovated our place, I mentally calculate the cost of every house I see. Terrible habit, but that's what I get for spending so much time at Home Depot. This

house is priced way out of my league. I can't appraise it. I can only admire it.

There are fountains and statues of vaious Buddhas all over the house. There is a not very good painting in the style of Monet. It's an obvious knock-off that's out of place in this house with so much authentic, good stuff. Lisa sees me looking at it. "It was painted by a man who channels all the master painters," she says. "Lautrec, Van Gogh, you name it."

Vera, the lady of the house, enters and greets us. She appears to be in her early sixties. She's wearing lavender sweats, and her light red hair is wet from the shower. She greets me warmly and gives me a hug that lasts for ten seconds. I've never met her before, but the intimacy of the hug feels exactly right. I don't know much about her, but I get the feeling that she and Lisa mostly hang out at home and meditate a lot.

In a corner by a French door that leads to a rose garden, I ask Hannah what Vera's husband does for a living. "Retired oil exec," she says. Hannah has all the scoop.

Besides Vera, Lisa, me, Hannah, and Sheila, there's Edna, Fred, Beth, and Matthew. We gather in the kitchen around a bowl of cherries, and between chewing fruit and spitting pits, we tell each other why we're here. Edna is overweight, phobic and depressed. Fred has intestinal problems. Beth isn't talking. Her presence is so weak, she's almost invisible. Matthew is diabetic and suicidal. Everyone here is hoping that the shaman will make them feel better.

Jasper arrives. He's wearing dirty blue jeans and a turquoise T-shirt. It looks exactly like the outfit he's wearing in the photo he's posting on his Web site. I wonder if he owns any other clothes. He has a long, greasy, graying pony tail, and a braided moustache that hangs all the way to the middle of his chest--by far the most unusual facial hair I've ever seen. I reckon his age about forty, but it's hard to say. He's got a kind of man-child thing going, with his middle-aged paunch and unlined baby fat face.

We've been milling about the kitchen, and Jasper joins our chit-chat for a few minutes. Then he decides it's time to get

down to business, which is fine by me.

There's a flurry of activity as he directs the men to rearrange the living room furniture. We have to make a circle with an eastward opening. The guys move a big glass and chrome coffee table and a couple of upholstered chairs. Now we need cushions so we can sit on Vera's stone floor for the next few hours. Lisa brings out a bean bag chair, some blankets, and an old green and blue plaid dog bed.

Everyone walks around trying to feel out where they want to sit, much in the manner of a dog scoping out a nap spot. This goes on for several minutes until we finally settle down. I've snagged the bean bag chair next to Hannah, who is on a stack of blankets. Edna has chosen the dog bed, which makes me feel sorry for her. Beth and Lisa are on my left. Jasper is next to them. Sheila is on his other side. Fred and Vera sunggle up together with their backs against the front of the sofa. Fred extends his legs out in front of him. His feet and ankles are the color of overripe bananas.

I see a resemblance between Vera and Fred, mostly around the jaw and mouth. I decide they're brother and sister, but later, Hannah tells me they're just good buds.

From a leather satchel, Jasper produces a big, round copper tray and two more small copper vessels. There are a couple of leather bags. Here comes a rattle, a two-sided drum, some feathers--I guess eagle, which turns out to be correct. Here's a tattered vest made from animal skins, possibly deer. There are doo-dads all over it--a bear pin, an arrow head, and some other objects that I can't quite identify. He slips it on over his T-shirt. He makes a headband from a dirty red rag.

Jasper announces that we are ready to begin. Sheila mimes to me from across the circle that I should remove my shoes. I slip them off and stash them behind the bean bag.

"We're going to create the circle," Jasper says. He pulls some shredded cedar out of his satchel, and sets the stuff on fire in one of the copper pots. Then he produces a pouch of tobacco and some papers, and he rolls a perfectly cylindrical cigarette. "Tobacco is a gift to the peoples. Its smoke carries our prayers,"

he intones. He starts to chant. "Grandfather Tobacco, Grandmother Cedar, we that you..." The rest is a blur of cigarette smoke, incantations in some Native American tongue, and singing. I have no idea what he's singing about, except that the tone is prayerful. The song goes on for many minutes. First I'm fascinated, then I start to shift. My thighs make rude noises on the vinyl bean bag chair. I think, he sounds like a Jewish cantor. I think, I'm going to giggle. I study the pattern in the gray stone floor.

Finally, Jasper winds down. He launches into a long lecture, opining that spiritual parasites are transferred from person to person by abuse. They make their hots continue the pattern of abuse. "The peoples do terrible things through no fault of their own," Jasper says in a low, tearful voice. I think what about karma? What about personal responsibility? Much of what he has said so far is consonant with the Buddhist world-view to which I subscribe, but the parasites-made-me-do-it theory is a stark departure. Jasper goes on to say that spiritual parasites lodge in various organs and hatch their spawn. I find the word spawn repellent.

"Spiritual," (he says it speerchal) "parasites give people the compunction to abuse others," he says. I know he means compulsion, not compunction, and I wonder why he doesn't know that. He uses compunction incorrectly a dozen times at least. I consider correcting him if I get the chance. I decide it's not my job to give him a vocabulary lesson, but every time he says compunction, I twitch inwardly. His speech goes on for thirty minutes. We started at five. It's now six. I don't know if I can sit on this bean bag for another three hours. My back hurts. My feet are cold.

Jasper asks us to go around the circle and say why we're here. Sheila wants her much-operated-upon noggin to work better. Fred wants to digest his food properly. Vera has candida. Around the circle we go. Hannah says, "I want the pain to stop." The room goes quiet. A few moments pass, and Hannah says, "I have a deep, deep sadness. I don't know where it comes from, but it makes me not want to go on."

I well up. Thick, slippery tears slide out of my eyes and run out of my nose. I do not have any tissues. I can't get up, because I'll break the circle, so I wipe my nose on my sleeve and hope that no one notices.

Jasper is looking at me. I don't want to talk about myself, so I say, "Hannah is so great. I really love her." I snuffle some more. Everyone but Hannah looks at me.

I say, "I'm here because Djwhal insisted that I come." The line gets a laugh. Djwhal Khul--or D. K. for short--was a Tibetan monk. When he departed this world in the mid-1950s, he became an "ascended master." He conducts counseling sessions and teaches a teleconference class by speaking through a woman in Sedona, Arizona. D. K. claims to hang out with Jesus and other members of the so-called spiritual heirarchy. His advice, when I've asked for it, is usually right on target, and at the very least, he's a fascinating conversationalist. He insisted that I go see Jasper when he came to L. A. It was the only time he insisted on anything, and that's another reason I'm here.

This whole crowd talks to Djwhal, so no one thinks it's strange to consort with a witch doctor on the advice of an alleged ascended master/dead guy. "I think Djwhal is tired of hearing me complain." I'm working the room. Jasper and everyone are still looking at me. I'm expected to say more.

"I have a deep disgust with the world. With the way the world operates." I'm referring generally to the long human history of anger, feed, and stupidity, and the current heinous manifestations of those imperfections. I'm also referring to the minor, quotidian irritations we all suffer: drivers who change lanes without signalling, loud cell phone talkers, government functionaries who do not function, and people who converse at the movies as if they were sitting in their own living room. Actually, what disgusts me the most is my own anger, greed and stupidity, but I don't know these folks well enough to say that. Neither do I care to discuss the waves of sadness that sometimes wash over me for no fathomable reason. "I'd like a sunnier outlook," I say.

Jasper nods. He blows tobacco smoke across an eagle feather to carry my wish aloft.

Jasper starts another ceremony. And another and another. Jasper does all the work, all the singing, chanting, cedar-burning, cigarette rolling, smoking, blowing, rattling, drumming, coughing, and feather-batting. Each round of rituals lasts about thirty minutes. I try to pay attention, but all that droning and smoking is soporific. At one point, Hannah's head falls to her chest, and she emits a deep, sonorous, snore. I shake her shoulder as discreetly as possible and she snaps to.

Lisa's poodle is somewhere outside. He's been barking non-stop for three hours. The dog's name is Joshiel, after an archangel. Lisa is nothing if not consistent.

At about 8 pm, we take a break. There's a dim ribbon of light on the horizon. Vera has thoughtfully provided stuffed grape leaves, cheese, and Carr's wheat biscuits. I munch a biscuit, comfortable as kin in her beautiful kitchen, and swing my feet as I sit on one of the high stools at the granite counter. I sure do love the grainy texture of those biscuits, but they're just whetting my appetite. I could really go for a chicken caesar salad right about now.

Our break is over in fifteen short minutes. It's time to assemble. I put my paper plate on the counter and return to the circle.

Jasper says, "During the next couple of hours, we will..." I can't hear anything after that. Next couple of hours? I thought this event was supposed to last for four hours. We've already been at it for three. Hannah and I look at each other with big eyes.

"You know," Jasper is saying as I pick up the thread again, "there are a lot of hustlers out there." Gee, you think?

There is almost no light in the room now. Just as I wonder if we're going to sit in the dark for the rest of the evening, Jasper breaks his own train of thought and says, "Can we have some light?" Vera jumps to her feet, and toggles a switch on the wall. She adjusts the recessd lighting to a warm, romantic hue.

Jasper sets fire to more cedar. Here comes another ceremony. He warns us to stay awake, "Or else you'll slip into the spirit world, I'll have to go and find you, and the evening will be

over." We all straighten up. He says, "I'm about to open a portal," which sounds to me like a line from Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Jasper lights all manner of combustibles--cedar, sage, tobacco--the room is as smoky as a nightclub. He's singing again. His voice is strong. He falsettos his way into an impossibly high register and swoops back down again to his vocal basement. He fills his lungs with air and belts out the song with everything he's got. He's red-faced and sweating. He drums, he shakes the rattle, he chants. I don't know what to make of it, but it looks to me as if Jasper is completely sincere. He finishes with a high-pitched whoop and a flick of an eagle feather.

There's someone lurking in the kitchen, watching us. I try to watch him right back out of the corner of my eyes. He's about six feet tall, late sixties, white hair--must be Vera's husband. He's as still as the refrigerator. He looks weightless, boneless, ghostlike. I look away. When I loook back again, he's gone.

It's lecture time again. I feel like I've been sitting on this bean bag since the Cretaceous era. I understand that shamans operate outside the usual space/time continuum, but in my opinion, Jasper ought to be more sensitive to the workaday pressures on his real world clients. Wrap it up, buddy.

He explains that spiritual parasites lodge in various organs. If they're in the kidneys, they produce a feeling of never being able to slow down, of always having to push. In the solar plexus, they create chronic fear. Rageaholics have parasites in their livers.

He asks us to pick an organ for parasite removal. He can only clean one site at a time. Sheila and I are kidney people. Hannah, Vera, Lisa, Beth, and Ednapick the solar plexus. Matthew and Fred pick the pancreas, for reasons I forget.

It's now 10 pm. Here comes the good part. After this very long build-up, Jasper is actually going to perform the parasite removal. He mixes red clay with water in the palm of his hand to make paint, and draws a symbol--I can't make out the shape--on the spot each of us has chosen. I lift my shirt, turn around, and let him smear the stuff on both sides of my back at

kidney level.

He treats us in groups of threes, because he needs to rest in between. He rolls some cedar chips into a wad and puts the wad in his mouth. He takes a six-inch copper pipe, places it on the red mark, blows through it, sucks through it, and beats the spot with an eagle feather. Then he spits the cedar wad into a glass of water. He sits down on his cushion and starts to hack. He sounds just like a cat coughing up a hairball. With each wrenching "Hoo-acchh!" he propels a spray of saliva across the room. I try not to flinch.

This is the procedure he repeats with each of us in turn: blowing, sucking, flapping, spitting, and the hairball finish. I figured there'd be some bodily fluids somewhere in the evening's program, but the hairball thing is really gross.

When it's my turn, I present my backside, and Jasper goes at it. He plants that copper tube on my skin and sucks so hard I totter. For a second, I have an awful vision of toppling through Vera's huge picture window and landing in her rose garden in a splash of bloody glass. I return to reality as Jasper bats at my fanny. Being thwapped with eagle feathers is strangely refreshing, but I don't feel anything of a mystical nature. I was hoping for a little tingle at the very least.

"Wait a few moments, and the parasites will precipitate in the water," he says. We examine the glasses. We each have our own glass, into which Jasper has hocked our very own cedar chip wad--all the better for individual parasite contemplation. Pale red cedar shreds float on top. Everyone sees black bits settling to the bottom. These, according to Jasper, are the parasites made manifest. I think they look like mouse poop. Hannah and I examine each other's bits. I wonder what she's thinking. What I'm thinking is "I wish I could have examined this wad of stuff before he put it in his mouth."

Vera leads us to her backyard, where we dispose of the contents of our glasses in the dirt next to her garage. The parasites have been rendered harmless according to Jasper, and the Earth will receive them.

Back to the circle. It's 10:45. We go around the circle

and say how we feel. I feel tired, hungry, and ready to go home, but I say, "I feel a pleasant nothingness." This elicits a smile and knowing nod from Jasper.

Jasper sings his closing number. It feels like it goes on for days three days, but it's probably three minutes. When he stops, Hannah says, "Do we give you the money now?"

"No, no!" Jasper says, recoiling. "We've been here a long time," he says with a weary, avuncular smile. "A few more minutes won't hurt."

He proceeds to list his other services. He leads some sort of spiritual camping trip, and now he's talking about his camping menu. It's a sales pitch, pure and simple. The evening has devolved from spirituality to commerce. I cannot sit on this bean bag another minute. Sheila asks a question, and Hannah and I say in unison, "Excuse me!" Sheila's eyes narrow. She is clearly not used to being interrupted.

"Some of us have to work tomorrow," I say.

"Yes, and we have a long way to drive," Hannah adds.

Jasper winces at our apostasy. With a long sigh, he agrees to close the circle. First, we each hand him our cash-filled envelopes. Vera and Sheila have gone to the kitchen. We call them over so we can have the closing chant. Sheila has misplaced her money envelope. She wants us to wait while she looks for it.

"The money can wait," Jasper says, and Hannah and I nod our heads. We gather for one last prayer/song/chant. When he finishes, Jasper says, "Your life is about to change dramatically." He tells us to expect wondrous improvements, but he declines to specify. He launches into one last burst of verbiage on his favorite topic, abuse. "If anyone abuses you, just run!" he says. I'd like to run right now. I've been sitting on a vinyl bean bag chair for six hours. I'm famished, exhausted, irritated and bored, which qualifies as abuse in my book, but I keep my mouth shut and stay put. Finally, Jasper says, "It's done."

I put on my shoes. Hannah and I stand up. I take a leak for the road in Vera's guest bathroom, give her a hug, thank her for the use of her house, and look for Hannah. She's in another

bathroom.

Jasper is by himself in the living room, packing his stuff into the leather stachel. "Well, that was something," I say. "I'll e-mail you and let you know what ensues."

"Okay," he says, without looking at me.

Hannah and I walk into the night. As soon as we're off Vera's property and on the street, we look at each other and burst out laughing. God, it feels good to laugh.

In a few minutes, we're on Topanga, headed north to the Valley.

"So what do we make of that?" Hannah says.

"I think that Jasper thinks his deal is real," I say. "But me, no so much."

"Yeah, me too."

At this time of night, there's almost no traffic on Topanga Canyon Boulevard. A warm breeze rattles the trees. Somewhere in the dry brush, amid the houses and graded lots, coyotes and foxes prowl for their supper.

"You know what?" I say. "I'm tired of paying people for things I should be doing on my own. If I'm going to be enlightened, I'm going to have to do it under my own steam."

Hannah nods. "Now if I could only think of a way to make up the $208.00," I say.

"Well, if you write about it," Hannah says, "it'll be deductible!"

Just then, the lights of the good old San Fernando Valley come into view.

Janyse Dela Cruz

The Whispering Trees

Darkness. Even the darkness of night couldn't soothe my forehead's pinched pain. The soft artificial light from the lamp outside my window was like a stalker invading my privacy. As I lay there in my troubled solitude with the overhead lights off and the wind fiercely howling, I thought to myself, why did I ever leave home?

I was a fool to think that I could do as I did in high school—conquer all things: my goals, my teachers, even myself. I came to this far away school thinking that nothing would stand in the way of my success. Filled with misguided confidence from having my greatest triumph immortalized in the Honolulu Advertiser, I entered college with the smug superiority of the rich, parading before the riffraff on the corners of Beverly and Wilshire. I had spent so much time trying to convince people that I was better than they, that in the end, even I was converted. I desperately wanted others to believe that I was someone special, someone worth admiring. If only they could have seen me cowering in my empty dorm room, bundled in layers of blankets, staring miserably out the window, with the bare tree branches tap, tapping to the wind's beat.

What a pitiful sight, the proud girl wallowing in self-defeat.

I had few friends. And the coursework was harder than I had anticipated. I was struggling in all my classes, earning mostly "B"s and the occasional "A." I no longer enjoyed the privilege of being named the smartest girl in school. I felt small and insignificant. I found out that the interesting person that I was back home in Hawaii was little more than a faint memory. No one here knew about the great things that I had accomplished in high school. Most of them could have cared less. For the first time, I was faced with the realization that I had absolutely no idea who I was or what my purpose in life should be. I was an out-

sider in a strange world, longing only to be home again, where all was right, and I was loved.

All I knew for sure was that if I didn't do something soon, my depression would overwhelm me and the piercing pain between my eyes would cause me to faint. I tried to think of happier times, watching movies with my best friends Kimi and Gerald or sitting alone on the cool sands of Makaha beach as the waves crashed against the coral. But nothing seemed to calm my agitation. My body ached because my muscles refused to relax and my eyes felt raw from all the unshed tears.

At last, I resolved to leave my enclosed darkness in favor of the night wind. The digital clock against the far wall read 12:36 a.m. In my sleeping shirt and shorts, I tumbled out of bed. I grabbed my favorite extra-large navy blue sweatshirt with a drawstring hood and a large front pocket and pulled it over my head. I slipped out the door, easing it shut so as not to disturb the slumbering residents. I walked down the dormitory hall toward the 2nd floor patio. All was quiet. Most of my neighbors were probably comfortably tucked beneath a multitude of covers, arming themselves against the draft that old buildings like Brady Hall tend to let in.

As I approached the door leading to the open terrace, I could faintly hear the hypnotic shushing of the moving wind. The moment I opened the door, whoosh, the cold midnight air bit my exposed skin. Immediately my arms and legs were covered with hundreds of tiny bumps and my body shivered in time with the jostling trees. I ignored the frigid cold and I sought out one of the wooden benches that overlooked the pole lights of the campus circle and shadowy outline of the library.

I sat down, pulled my knees to my chest, stretched my sweater over my goose-fleshed legs, and placed my hood over my freezing ears. Then I simply sat there in complete silence. I closed my eyes and I listened to the sounds of the storm as it moved the trees around me. I let the wind shoulder my troubles and I succumbed to its serenity. I was oblivious to the cold, and within moments, the rhythmic swaying of the trees took me back to my beloved white sand beach with the waves gently lapping

onto the shore. The chilled sands cooled my warm body and the waves carried my anxieties away....

Sometime later I came back to consciousness. Besides the telltale signs that both my fingers and toes felt numb to the touch and my lower jaw shook involuntarily, I had no way of knowing how long I had stayed in that position. I don't know where my mind was during that time, perhaps I had fallen asleep or maybe I let my overactive imagination deceive me. Whatever happened, I felt as if I had just stepped back into my body after being severed from it for a considerable space of time.

The bittersweet coldness numbed my limbs and reduced my head splitting migraine to a manageable throb. As I inspected the whispering trees surrounding the patio, my thoughts wandered back to my hometown beach with the waves languidly rushing forward. The similarity between the two brought a fresh trail of tears down my chilled face--soothing my sore eyes. I sat there and cried, unashamed of my tears and relieved that they had finally been shed. With my tear coated eyes, frozen limbs and healed heart I turned to the trees and thanked the wind for comforting me when my soul was in despair and the ocean was no where to be seen.

Maureen Kelly

Christmas Eve, Cheap Cabernet,
and The Cedar Chest

During the holidays, a lot of my friends make plans to visit relatives all over the United States, and even in other countries. Christmastime is the only part of the year that they get to see Aunt Margot and Cousin Rudolph. They pack their bags and hurriedly sprint off in a Roadrunner Shuttle to LAX, praying that they aren't late and that they didn't forget the camera. Blessedly, I never have to do that. My entire family lives in the same city, and I see them on a regular basis (mostly.) I have two grandparents, fifteen cousins, ten aunts and uncles...and then there is my family of six. Needless to say, our Christmas Eve Extravaganza is enormous, terribly loud, and often ends with a group of eight-year-olds wrestling over the last piece of cheesecake.

"Knock that off right now, or Santa isn't coming tonight!"

We, the family Powers, all 33 of us plus a few spare in-laws, gather at Pookie (Grandpa) and Grandma's house around five o'clock on Christmas Eve, presents, babies, and several bottles of cabernet in tow. I'm the oldest of the grandkids, so it's my job to make sure that the little ones don't shred the presents or smash Grandma's Hummel figurines between five o' clock and dinner. This is a more difficult job than one would think. When you are dealing with four hyperactive boys who go off of their Ritalin over Christmas break, it's difficult to keep them from morphing into one gigantic ball of flying fists and flailing legs that demolishes anything in its path. Every year I say to myself, "Next time, I'm bringing a stun gun." Fortunately for the kids, I haven't been able to get my hands on one. Yet.

There are some aunts and uncles who don't have little kids anymore and forget what it's like to be around four-year-olds; they are actually dumb enough to wear dry-clean-only clothes to the festivities. Throughout the course of the night, I hear Aunt Susan warning, "No, no, no, don't touch Auntie Susie with those

hands." (Note: those hands generally include those slathered with cranberry sauce, dirt, snot, and dog hair.)

Dinner is served around six, and this is, conveniently, the time at which the children decide that they aren't hungry. Because they are good parents, my aunts and uncles manage to stuff a few green beans down their kids' throats, despite the dramatic protests of the children. When the pie and ice cream come out, the children have, thankfully, regained their appetites, and are ready to stuff themselves with dessert.

" You're not getting one taste of pie until you eat five bites of turkey! Five bites! I mean it!"

After we've eaten, The Aunts rush to the kitchen because "Grandma's done enough." As usual, she cooked the whole meal, cleaned her house from top to bottom, and tranquilized her dog just for us. Are we are supposed to let her do the dishes too? No way! But Grandma hates when The Aunts do this, and I would too if it were my china. After four or five glasses of cabernet, who wouldn't be apt to drop a few plates here and there? While The Aunts do dishes, Grandma sweats bullets in the hall, just waiting to hear the sickening crack of a shattering teacup. Whoops!

After the dishes are done, Grandma, always patient and graceful, assesses the damage in the kitchen. Who put her gold-rimmed wine glasses in the dishwasher? They can't go in there! Every year, some tipsy aunt or demented in-law puts one of Grandma's gold-rimmed wine glasses in the dishwasher. When someone cops to doing it, the other aunts look at her with a touch of pity, for they remember when they themselves made the same mistake. Mostly though, they just look at her with disgust and revulsion. What kind of person puts Grandma's gold-rimmed wine glasses in the dishwasher?

Around seven thirty, "Santa" flies over our city. "Santa" is really a helicopter adorned with green and red lights, but the little kids don't know any better and they are always anxious to see the "sleigh." When Uncle Joseph hears the faint whoosh of the approaching "sleigh," he alerts the kids and everyone who cares (Read: anyone under ten years old) runs outside to wave and

jump around in case "Santa" happens to look down. One time, when the kids ran out, my Uncle Alan remarked, "Ahh, it's nice to have a minute of silence without the kids in here." Also enjoying the silence, Pookie looked at him and snapped, "Shut up!"

Finally, it is time to sit down and open presents in an orderly and respectful fashion, ever mindful of the true meaning of the Christmas Season. But instead, Uncle Alan plays Santa, doling out presents to greedy kids who can't sit still and don't read the cards. The adults aren't as obnoxious as the little ones, but it's hard to hide the fact that no one wants anything they've received. One year, my Uncle Art and Aunt Rachel gave my parents A Book to Finish Before You Die. It was a fill-in book with the purpose of letting your adult kids know how to turn off the gas in your house and where you had open bank accounts once you bit the dust. I am not making this up. It was a hardcover book about fifty pages long. It had sections dedicated to your preference, in order, of burial sites and procedures, who your electrician is, and how much warranty is left on the car. You are supposed to leave this book around so that, if you croak, your kids will know exactly what they get to cash in. Morbid. Bizarre. Can you believe they gave that to my parents as a Christmas gift?

"Thanks...This is really...Interesting...I'm sure we'll have a lot of fun filling it out...Where's the cabernet?"

One good thing about the gift situation in our family is that we draw names instead of buying a million cheap gifts for everyone. Each cousin picks another cousin, and each married couple picks another married couple. Generally, what I do is call up the person who I have chosen and ask him what he wants. You want a new pair of ski boots? Ok, fine, e-mail me with the brand, model and size that you want. This sort of takes the fun out of shopping and spending time in order to select just the right gift for others, but it takes the hassle out too. Once I did not ask my cousin Michael, whose name I had drawn that year, what he wanted. I thought I'd be clever and select something on my own. Ha! I ended up running around Ventura County the day of the event, hunting madly for something to give this ten-year-old boy

who has everything. My mom and I searched and scoured. We went to three malls with no luck. In the end, we bought him a lava lamp at a novelty store and hid in the bathroom when he opened it. What kind of person gives a ten-year-old a lava lamp?

By nine o'clock, the kids are coming down from their sugar highs and are getting cranky, restless, and already bored with their new gifts. So is Pookie. Don't let the cute nickname fool you; he's 82 and gets more crotchety every year. When the presents have been opened and the bottles of cabernet are running dry, Pookie tries to get everyone to leave by packing up their things and throwing them out onto the porch. If you can't find your camera, Pookie probably threw it outside with your presents, purse, and infant. Pookie is a retired doctor, has six children of his own, and also has nineteen grandchildren; he's heard enough whining from kids in his life. When the presents are opened, he expects us to vacate his home. You want to chit-chat? That's what the telephone is for.

When things are winding down like this, Grandma and I usually go into her bedroom so that she can tell me that the presents I gave her were her favorites. I don't have to spend my money on little old her. I should save up for something I want. No, Grandma, you've done enough for me to last forever, and the least I can do is buy you some Mother Teresa books. Thank God for Mother Teresa. She wrote enough books to keep Grandma happy for a lifetime. In addition to Knowing Jesus, I bought Grandma a blue nightgown from the Gap. She said that I must have known exactly what she wanted, because she needed a new blue nightgown. I've gotten her a new blue nightgown every year since I was twelve.

When we emerge from the bedroom, some of the cousins have gone home and others are fighting with their siblings or are still searching for their camera that is on the porch where Pookie threw it. My mom and her sister, Aunt Laura, are arguing over who gets Grandma's antique cedar chest when she dies. I know, I know, this sounds awful. But in our family, death is something that is joked about. Grandma has gone around the house and attached stickers to the bottoms of all her things. On the sticker,

she writes the name of the person who gets it when she dies. Usually, you get your name put on something because you initially gave it to Grandma, and you're just going to get it back. When he was in the Army, Uncle Joseph sent Grandma Delft china from Denmark, and he gets it back when she dies. Aunt Janet gave Grandma a crucifix blessed by the Pope, and someday Aunt Janet will get that back too. We buy presents for Grandma with this in mind. Just kidding.

The cedar chest is different though. It was my great-grandmother's. She died when Grandma was fifteen, and it has been an intensely cherished item ever since. Every year at Christmas, my mom and Aunt Laura, who are best friends, contend over who gets it. Each gives the reasons why she is the deserving recipient of the chest. It's sort of a joke, and the battle is definitely fueled by the cabernet, but I know they both want it, and between the sarcastic barbs at one another are serious pleas for the honor of inheriting the heirloom chest. I'm sure that both women feel they are completely entitled to the item, and both probably think that they are the one who's going to someday own it. But, as selfish and unusual as the whole thing is, I have to smile when I hear them revive the annual argument over the chest. I smile because I know that Grandma has already decided the fate of the cedar chest. Late one night she got out her stickers and put a name on the bottom of that coveted piece of family history, and never told anyone. Actually, she told one person.

Someday in the distant future, my mom and Aunt Laura are going to flip that chest over, eagerly anticipating the announcement of its new owner. Each will search carefully for the tiny sticker that reveals the destiny of the cedar chest. As they read the sticker, their faces will be overcome by looks of confusion and disbelief, coupled with the blank stares of daughters who have been duped by their own mother. They will doubt, briefly, but the stickers don't lie. Their names aren't on the bottom of that woodsy-smelling chest...it is filled with worn Mother Teresa books and blue nightgowns of Christmases past. I get these things back in a lovely antique box.

Hovel

Buildings lean on buildings and there is barely space to squeeze through something that might once have been an alley. Trash. Bugs unseen but certainly heard. Boarded up windows and doors, smell of burning meat that might be the smell of burning flesh. Be kicking a can, if there were one lying about. Kick a rat instead. Fog, now, setting up like a wall. Obviously near the wharf. Sounds of the friendly neighborhood whorehouse; I'm listening to prostitutes and sailors stagger in the fog, drunk and laughing when a fog-shrouded man plows into me, wiping blood from his hands.

Corazon

Hart Island is one hundred and one acres in size. It is one mile long and varies in width from one third to one eighth of a mile wide. In 1868, the island was purchased by New York City and established as a graveyard for the city's indigent and unclaimed dead. As well as being a Potter's Field off and on for 134 years, the island also been a camp for prisoners of war during the Civil War, a yellow fever quarantine hospital, an insane asylum, a tuberculosis hospital, a home for misdemeanants, ages 16-30, a Naval disciplinary barracks, a narcotics rehabilitation hospital and a Nike missile silo. Today, inmates from Riker's Island perform, on average, two to three thousand burials a year. Current records indicate over a quarter of a million bodies are interred at Hart Island, fifty percent of them infants.
Sheridan looked down the row of faces, mentally checking off his roster. The bus lurched as it hit the ferry ramp and his hand stretched out to grasp the rail beside the driver.

"Sentillo's lookin' worse, boss," Angie muttered as his gnarled hands cranked the steering wheel, aligning the decrepit vehicle with the tow chains that would anchor it to the deck for the ride back to Riker's Island.

"He's even paler than you are."

"Shut the fuck up and drive, Angie," Sheridan growled, taking his seat. He'd already taken note Sentillo's eyes, carefully fixed on his white knuckled hands in his lap. Mixed with the grunt and growl of the ferry's diesel engines, the whisper of Sentillo's words could be heard.

"Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo, bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres, y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús"

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit your womb, Jesus. Normally the ride back from Hart Island was boisterous. Tired voices laughing and joking, the physical exhaustion and sweat

having cleansed something of the hopelessness from the inmate's bodies. The past six weeks those voices had grown steadily quieter, and today, Sentillo's frantic prayer was all that could be heard from the fifty odd men that stared at the back of Sheridan's head.

"You gonna have to do somethin', boss." Sheridan looked up at Angie in the broad rearview mirror of the bus. Over his own shoulder, he could see fifty odd pair of eyes echoing that sentiment. Gonna have to do something and soon, boss, or we just might have to do it for you.

Sheridan let his eyes drop back to the dark water of the Hudson and nodded, his lips tight. Sentillo would spend another night in the infirmary, half for his own safety and half for his sanity.

"Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén."
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

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"It took some arm twisting, but I managed to get his file. Court still has a seal on his psyche profile, though. You'd think those sunzabitches would understand that we have to put these men back together just enough to let them survive in here." Dr. Hern Victor slapped the file down on his desk and settled his coffee cup between two hands on top of it. Sheridan looked up at the doctor and waited for the short version. "There's a fresh pot made, help yourself." He gestured at the one clean spot on the counter.

"Thanks," Sheridan sighed, knowing that meant there was no short version.

"You know what he's in for?"

"Manslaughter, three consecutive ell-wops." Life without possibility of parole. "Don't know the details, 'cept that he's never been trouble. Didn't resist when they picked him up, or when they sentenced him. He's a quiet one." Sheridan plopped dry creamer into the stained mug.

"He's under investigation for seventeen more homicides,
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all prostitutes."

"So why isn't he in the feds' custody? Don't they have a bug house especially for those types?"

"Apparently he's not interesting enough for them. Anyway, he's here which means he's our problem, right?"

The old bull nodded, tapping his spoon on the rim and then sipping once, grimacing at the bitter and comforting taste. "Yeah, well his problem is making all my boys jittery. And that's not good."

"What can we do about it?" Grey eyes studied the doctor with concern.

"Nothing, as far as I can see. Your boys haven't been fucking with him, have they? I know they can be pretty hard on the new ones."

Sheridan shook his head and sipped, looked into his now empty mug, not remembering when he'd drank the last swallow. "Nah, in fact, they been avoiding him like the plague. He's got a screw loose. But this isn't the country club, doc. He's either on detail or in solitary. Maybe you could explain that to him."

Hern nodded, his lips pursed. "I'll mention it to him."

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Phillipa had been the last one. Sweet as dark honey, skin like golden mocha, voice to match. She'd lasted three months before he found out she was seeing other men. That she was still whoring, when she'd told him, told him he was the only one. He had never regretted taking his hands to their pretty necks, never thought that his revenge was unjustified. Even in death she was beautiful, her head tilted seductively, resting against the subway car's glass window. He never cut any of them, never marred their beautiful skin. And he never stayed around long enough to see the crimson bruises form even after the life had left the bodies. Phillipa had been strong and he'd had to brace himself against the glass, leaving a full palm print for the forensics team to identify him with later.

They picked him up on a drunk and disorderly, and by some fluke, the lab tech processed both sets of prints one right after the other. Luck had never been on Sentillo's side. He'd tast-
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ed sweet revenge from the decadent streets of Venice Beach to the colorful insanity of South Beach, somehow managing to stay a step ahead of his Luck. But the one time he hadn't moved fast enough, in a city that dwarfed Babylon, in a city where the rich ate the shit of Sodom and Gomorrah and called it a delicacy, in a city where twin brothers could live as neighbors for years and never even see each other, his Luck finally hunted him to the brink of extinction. His Luck had finally made him know regret.

He knew he'd get on that bus tomorrow, after morning chow. He knew they'd hand him a set of leather gloves and a stunted excuse for a shovel. He knew they'd give him a grid number and send him back into that pale nightmare of a meadow, the white markers marching away into the mist before him. And he knew she'd be waiting there for him.

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Red brick and leaves rustling underfoot. The breath of the river coming through the woods. Sheridan looked over at his companion, Father Miguel Alejandro, and nodded down the road from the ferry. "Ever been out here before, Padre?"

Miguel shook his head, letting the old bull's condescension wash over him like rain. This visit wasn't about him or about the eerie stillness of this place. It was about a man. A man with a heart and a soul. A man who's suffering seemed to have caught up with him. "No, but I have heard the stories. I've only served at Riker's for six months, Mr. Sheridan. There are many things I have yet to learn."

That made Sheridan nod and Miguel sensed his resignation. "Well, shepherd, you know your sheep better than I do." A gesture pointed out Sentillo, at the end of the line, waiting for his assignment. "I'll leave you to it. The bus leaves at six, so don't be late."

Miguel fingered the simple knotted cord in his pocket and nodded, his long legs taking him over the weathered asphalt to the group of blue-grey work suits. "Eleazar? Eleazar Sentillo?" Miguel took up one of the pairs of gloves and a digging bar. The young man turned, his brow furrowed at the new voice.

"Yeah man, whaddayouwant?"
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The priest smiled and extended his hand. "I just wanted to talk to you. My name is Father Miguel. Administration said you weren't handling the burial detail too well and that you might want – someone to talk to?"

Two years out of the cloister, two years as a spiritual advisor, six months of that time spent on death row, Miguel had seen many eyes filled with despair, with anger, and when a man was in his final moments, eyes filled with fear tinged with either acquiescence or defiance to the inevitable. But as long as he lived, the young priest would never forget the look of cold fear in this man's eyes. A hunted look stared back at him from the sunken eyes in Eleazar Jesus Sentillo's face.

"You can't help me, Padre. Lo siento." I'm sorry. Sentillo turned his back and walked away, Miguel at his side.
"It never hurts to talk, Eleazar." Silence. Miguel kept pace, lengthening his strides to do so. "You know, this place, it doesn't have to be scary. You could think of it as a place of peace."

Sentillo turned up the path to his grid assignment, and took his place in the work detail. 'Peace,' he thought, 'is not my fate. Here or anywhere else.' His shovel bit into the mud with a thud.
The priest looked at the detail foreman who gestured to the end of the pit they were digging. Miguel nodded and took up the corner, following the white line of lime that delineated where the pit was to be dug.

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Two hours later, Miguel wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his glove and sighed in relief when the trucks with the caskets showed up. He stood in line for water with the rest of the inmates, and made eye contact with Sentillo again, smiling as he splashed the first cup over his face and then drank deeply of the second.

"He's seems nice enough, Eleazar."

"Callaté," Sentillo hissed, too tired to jump when he heard her honey sweet voice.

"Ah, you don't want him to know." Phillipa sat on the tailgate of the truck, right next to the padre. Ghostly fingers
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reached out to touch the priest's dark hair and Sentillo grimaced, looking down at the ground quickly.

"Something the matter?" Miguel stepped away from the ghostly after image that was Sentillo's Luck. "Eleazar, you're shaking."

"I'm just tired," he hissed and again, escaped, back to the pit, his eyes fixed on the ground as he went. Even so, he moved, not in a straight line, but gave the truck a wide berth. The mist that hung above the ground seemed drawn to him. Miguel's eyes narrowed as he watched tendrils of gray suck at the man's pant legs, like fingers scrabbling for a grip on his ankles. Sentillo walked on, his head cocked at an odd angle. "Lo siento, Padre," he muttered, bending down to pick up his gloves.

At the end of the workweek, Father Miguel left the burial detail, five pounds lighter and no closer to Eleazar Sentillo's problem. Sheridan read his report with a touch of frustrated chagrin. The boy wasn't coming back chanting to himself each night, but the rest of the crew still wasn't back to normal. They all seemed a touch quieter, and Sentillo himself was drawn and subdued. Three months into his sentence, his complexion seemed to match the faded work clothes he wore each day, and there was a touch of silver at his temples.

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In his dreams, at least, he found refuge. They couldn't touch him while he slept. But on the island, Eleazar Sentillo walked among them, heard their cries and laughter, felt their cold fingers plucking at him, at his hair and his clothes. Phillipa whispered and he could feel her on his skin like snakes moving over sand, like small birds dancing under the dry branches. She was here somewhere, amongst the miles of plain plank caskets, filed away from memory, unclaimed save by his jealous hands. She had to be here somewhere.

The other inmates knew to steer clear of the man with the boyish features, especially on the days when the sun didn't break through the cloud cover. They watched him jerk and twist as if on puppet strings. They saw him curse and mutter under his breath. Some thought he had lost his mind somewhere in the
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concrete cells and sea green cages. The others, the ones who had been on Hart Island for years, knew something closer to the truth. They sat around waiting for the bus one sweet spring evening and it was old Novak who finally decided. Sully and Benjamin were more than happy to oblige, as long as Novak would do the explaining. They took Sentillo aside, down past the grid markers to where the water spigots were, saying they needed a hand cleaning up the tools.

"Hey boss." Sheridan looked up from his paperwork, his eyes focusing on the lifer known as Jameson Novak. Thirty years of captivity and labor had worked the man down to sinews and scrap metal, but he still had all his teeth. That was only part of the story behind his reputation as a diplomat.

"Hey Novak." The old man set himself down in the step of the bus and laced his fingers together, his elbows resting on his knees. Sheridan waited, finally pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and offering one. One match for both of them and a long drag later, the old man finally seemed to find his words.

"D'ya remember back when you used to work the yard, Sheridan? Y'know how, when you gots two men that wanna kill each other? That sometimes you just gotta let 'em sort it out?"

Sheridan nodded, his eyes picking over the group of workmen. He noted that Sully and Benjamin were gone. And that Sentillo was also missing.

"Well, me and the boys, we think that – well, some things are better just left to sort themselves out." Sheridan fixed a cold stare on the old man and Novak just shrugged. "It's better that way, sometimes, boss." Two figures came up the road, one pushing his wheelbarrow full of tools back to the shed, the other rolling his shoulder and cracking his neck. Neither silhouette matched the wiry form of Eleazar Sentillo.

"Y'think so, do you Novak." Sheridan looked down the road as the mist started to rise and the grey of the sky came down to meet it.

"I honestly do, boss. Me and the boys think that it's just – well, it's somethin' that needed doin'."

A shrug was all Sheridan could think of to respond to that recommendation with. Novak had been right about that crazy Russian they called Mick, now best friends with the wop that almost killed him. Maybe he was right about Sentillo. Maybe so. Sheridan ground the smoldering butt of his cigarette out on the bottom of his boot and put the stub into his shirt pocket. "Load up," he called, and the fifty odd men in his care lined up to get on the bus, Novak at the head of the queue. Sheridan nodded to him again, thinking to himself, 'The ferry will be back at six o'clock tomorrow morning. It's not like he's gonna freeze to death out here.' But his eyes stayed on the road until Angie's cough told him it was time to leave.

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Eleazar Jesus Sentillo woke up in a soft green place, swathed in shadows, the distant cacophony of voices reminding him of a party he'd been at back in Rosarita. Back where you could sleep on the beach and listen to the college kids dancing around their bonfires. But as desperately as he clung to that snippet of memory, colorless reality seeped back into his vision. Rubbing the sore spot on the back of his head, he opened his eyes to the red brick façade of the building he knew as the asylum. Weather silvered boards covered over the eyes and mouth of the structure, but the shape was instantly recognizable.

"No, no, no," he murmured, staggering to his feet. "Madre de Dios, don't leave me here!" His words swelled to a shout, echoing off the brick and being eaten by the last remnants of daylight. The orange pink reflection of sunlight dimmed as the sun submerged beneath the watery horizon, leaving him in a sea of haze and silence. Blinking, he waited. Silence. Maybe they slept too. Maybe they wouldn't –

The silence was too heavy, too thick. Somehow his eyes focused on the line of trees at the far edge of the road. That's all the shadows were. A line of trees. Just a line of trees on this side of the road, the tiny plaza in front of the brick structure. Shadows from sunset stretching out to him, walking toward him. Somehow Sentillo found himself on his knees when he saw the first faces resolving out of the mists. And the silence of their col-
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lective gaze crushed him further into the clay.
Phillipa, honey gold and radiant, stood out in the crowd, had always stood out in the crowd. She was a goddess of the sun, and he had loved her, he knew he had loved her. And he had killed her. Now she stood here among them, the throng of nameless and forgotten, as luminescent as his memory had crafted her.

"Elé azucar, mi novio," she whispered, smiling down at him. "You didn't think you could run from us forever, did you?"
The stillness shattered with her touch and the susurration rose like a tide around him, deafening in its intensity, sweeping him down into night. The exhalation of ten thousand voiceless figures eroded him, dissolved him into a thousand moments of regret and hate, of longing and loneliness, drowned him in their own misery. Voices unheard so long that with a captive audience, nothing could render them silent again, not even the childlike screams of the one living being in their midst.

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Epilogue

Hern looked at Sheridan across the desk. "He's just got a chill, that's all. Probably frightened himself half to death just from spending the night out there. He'll be alright."
Sheridan just shook his head. "It doesn't matter much now. Although he's still saying he wants to talk to the priest."
"That really doesn't surprise me much." The doctor sipped his coffee and waited, knowing that if Sheridan was done, he'd be out the door by now.
"Did you ever get that file back on him, Hern?"
"Yes, Samuel, now that you mention it, I did. And some interesting stuff it's got in it too. Seems he was born in New Orleans. Born with a caul over his face." This fact made no impression on Sheridan. "His mother fancied herself the next Blackbird and took her trade seriously. The original interviewer's notes say he was told that his daddy did her up against Marie Levaux's crypt."

That did get a reaction. "Wait, whatthe–? Blackbird? You mean his mother was a whore? Well, that much explains his being here. Who's Marie Levoh?"
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"Levaux. It's French. She was a famous voodoo witch." Sheridan muttered something and turned to wait for the explanation.

"Voodoo witch. Born with a caul." The doctor drew his palm over his face. The old bull looked at him with a blank stare. "He's been raised to believe he has psychic abilities. Second sight. Can see the dead."

That brought a cough that might have been a laugh and a gash in Sheridan's leathered face that might have been a smile. "You don't say?"

Hern nodded. "Makes more sense now, don't it?"

Sheridan only shook his head.

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"Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been –" Sentillo faltered, a dry cough rattling his frame. Father Miguel put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"That's alright, Eleazar, it doesn't matter how long it's been. Tell me. Talk to me."

Sentillo nodded, his eyes raising to meet Father Miguel's gaze.

"Father, I need you to do something for me."

"Alright. Whatever I can do."

"I need you to get something to write with. And I need you to write down some things for me. Ayúda me."

"Yes, I can, but the confessional is sacred, my son. You know you don't have to tell anyone what you tell me. And they can't make me talk either."

"I know, Father, I know. But I need you to do this."

"Alright, give me a moment." Father Miguel gestured out of the room to the guard outside. In a few minutes, Sentillo's hands had been shackled together and clipped to the chain at his waist. Then and only then could Father Miguel take out his writing pad. The prosecutor would later harangue him for not having a tape recorder, but he was a priest, not an investigator. A simple pad of paper would have to do.

"I can remember all of them, Father. It may take me time, but I know all of their names. And I can tell you where and
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when."

Sentillo's eyes searched Miguel's face as understanding dawned.

"Please, Father. Then I can rest. Then you can give me absolution." Miguel's hand shook slightly. The plea in the man's voice made the bile rise in his throat.

"Alright." He gazed down at the page, the pencil poised. "Tell me what you remember."

Sentillo closed his eyes and remembered Phillipa's face. She was smiling at him. Nodding encouragement. "Eleanor Trujillo. Los Angeles. 1996. Mary Stilson. Phoenix. 1996. Angelique..."

M. Shalako Velasquez

When the Rains Came Purple

When the rains came purple, the snails took over the rock. That's how the legend went. Lila Camarena had heard the story all her young life, with bits and pieces added on here and there depending on who was retelling the tale. John the mercadero always tacked on the ending where the major declared the snails "citizens for a day" and everyone in town had to go to the rock just north of the Great Chasm to pay them homage. Daniel Castro from the Fix-It shop liked to leave the ending up in the air, intimating the snails vanished into the rainbow that always appeared after a purple rain. He said the rainbow's purple stripe was what gave the snails their special power, their uncanny ability to know what was going to happen before it ever happened. Lila loved to listen to the different versions of the snail stories, once even adding on her own twist about the biggest snail named Emilio and how his feelers always twitched east whenever something monumental was about to occur.

They twitched eastward the day Gracia Montes hung her wash out to dry on a blistering summer day when all the dogs in town started to bay at once. In a dark, unexplained moment, she hanged herself on the clothesline and swayed there for half a day before her daughter Lupita found her and cut her down. They twitched eastward the time Jose Luna took off all his clothes and peddled through the main street of town in his daughter's splintered wagon, yelling "viva la revolucion" until he lost control and crashed into the water tower, unleashing a torrent of swirling water that wiped out every sign post between Camino Central and Avenida Segundo. And who could forget Ramon and Lucia's wedding? Emilio's retractable antennae bent so far eastward that day that people were afraid to leave their homes. Ramon and Lucia could not find a soul to witness their union and so they began their honeymoon on the steps of the courthouse, much to

Sheriff Duran-Cruz's chagrin. The lawman glanced out his office window just as Ramon dropped his pants and proclaimed to his beloved, "I promise. It is better than any steak you have ever had."

That story was usually shushed in mixed company but sometimes at night when her father and his friends were drinking cervezas in the rear alley, Lila would sneak around the back porch window where she could hear more detailed versions of Ramon and Lucia's infamous honeymoon arrest. Details she would later recount to the stuffed animals at her tea parties and whenever she mentioned her father's favorite addition, the one about "hiding the chorizo," Boo the Bear blushed crimson.

The year Lila turned twelve the purple rains failed to appear. No snails came to the rock. It was as though time had stopped, for the appearance of the rains and the snails gave the town its own particular sense of motion and without them a bareness took root, a drought more profound than the mere absence of water. Animals stopped breeding. The grapes in the vineyard withered. Wine soured. The wind stopped singing. People stayed at home, or stayed late at work, so that at 5:15 in the afternoon when the town's square would normally be gushing with bodies, there was instead a stillness so delicate one could hear it scrape against the pavement. One could hear it flap against the banner atop John's mercadito, the one with the head of Joaquin Murrieta on it, laughing at his enemies. That April, Lila stood at her upstairs window each day staring out at the canvas of sky, searching for a sign the rains would come. But the clouds remained cotton white, never turning that delicate shade of pewter that always signaled the onset of the town's special downpour.

That April, Lila asked her father why the rains came in the first place, and why the snails appeared only during that time. Papa Camarena laughed a stiff laugh that always caught in the bristles of his peppered moustache. He took Lila by the hand and walked her to the barren rock on the very edges of town where eleven months out of the year there was never even a hint of snails. But in April, with its purple rains, it was as though the

rock burst open and blossomed with soft bodies and hard shells.

"Do you know what a blessing is, mijita?" asked Papa.

Lila nodded, thinking of the last blessing she had known, the swift passing of the town's matriarch, Senora Mayora, who had she lingered, would have deteriorated from consumption until a painful death could claim her. Instead, the old woman climbed to the top of the town square's flagpole with the help of her five harelipped grandsons and, after singing an off key version of Las Mananitas, plunged fifty feet to the pavement below in the most beautiful swan dive anyone had ever remembered seeing. The applause rang throughout the town for a full ten minutes before Sheriff Duran-Cruz ordered the body taken to the morgue. The pavement was washed clean save one heart-shaped splotch of blood that would forevermore be known as El Corazon del Pueblo, and for months people from neighboring villages came to pay reverence at the consecrated spot.

"Senora Mayora was blessed," Lila said, "and because of her sacrifice, our town has been blessed, as well."

"Yes, yes!" Papa exclaimed. " That is exactly right. After the Senora dies, old Camela Cano went into shock and when she regained her senses, she could heal the sick with her chants and did so for a long while, until her death. Ricardo Benicio could suddenly remember the tongue of the ancients and for a whole month revealed the secrets of the honorable ones and gained knowledge from the great spirits. And remember Juana the Ugly? Why, she became a beauty instantaneously. Every eligible bachelor in the land came to court, though eventually her ugliness and bent spine returned. And it is the same with the snails.

"You see, many, many years ago, so long ago that no one remembers the year, our ancestors came to live under the umbrella of the eucalyptus groves. It was barren land, except for the trees, and Papa Chanito, the father of all fathers, saw the grove and proclaimed it a sign from heaven that beneath the fragrant leaves our town would be founded. But in order to build the town, some of the trees had to be moved, so the men of the tribe lovingly uprooted them and took them to the edges of the settle-

ment so that they would form a new border. And when the warm wind whistled through them, the mentholated aroma kissed the huts and clung to the roofs so that the first generation of children saw no sickness. In thanks for his blessing, Papa Chanito came here, to the large sandstone boulder by the Great Chasm, the one that was so heavy it could not be moved. It was the 1st of April, one month before the great harvest and because of this, he offered to it a riddle—what was hard yet soft when sprouted, appeared when it rained and moved without feet? The rock speckled brightly under the spring sun yet remained silent, and Papa Chanito feared it was somehow displeased. He explained that he intended to offer it the best of the new crops, yet the rock stayed shimmering in its silence. With much sorrow in his heart, Papa Chanito turned on his bad leg and began limping home. As he walked, he noticed the clouds begin to change color, from snowy white to deep, silvery gray. Then it started to rain, soft sprinkles at first, then a deluge so dense it became a continuous sheet. Yet the sun still gleamed, and it was just this gleaming through the deep silver-gray of the clouds that colored the rain soft lavender, then a vibrant purple. The whole of the town ran to the Great Chasm in fear their crops be ruined. But when they arrived at the rock, they found it covered in snails of all sizes. Papa Chanito smiled, for he knew then the riddle had been answered and this was not a curse, but another blessing bestowed upon the town. The purple rain lasted only a short time and come the harvest, the crops were abundant and the town prospered, and has prospered ever since."

"And Emilio?" asked Lila. "Why is he so much bigger than the other snails?"

Papa Camarena dismissed the question with a wave of his withered hand.

"Why does the sun shine only during the day? There are just some things that are, and we should accept them without question."

"Like death?" asked the child.

"Yes," said Pap Camarena. "Death is one of those things."

Lila bowed her small head, her hair black and tangled

into two braids that drooped from her shoulders like drying vines from a garden trellis. She asked, "Papa, what day is it?"

Her father replied, "Thursday."

"No, the date?"

Papa consulted his heirloom pocket watch, the one green with tarnish, its lid a turn of the century American half dollar pressed and heated into an oval mold.

"Today is Thursday, April 5th."

Lila wrinkled her chata nose to the sky, her long, clumpy lashes arcing up from closed eyes against the rise of her cheeks. "The rain usually starts by the 1st, right?"

"Yes," her father nodded.

She reopened her eyes and took in the whole of her father. For a moment, he seemed smaller, as thought he had lost something in the recounting of the town's history. But the moment passed and was replaced by a sense of dignity, of special favor, and Lila could have sworn she saw her father's stooped shoulders straighten with youth long gone. She asked, "Do you think the rain will ever come again?"

Papa Camarena took off his tattered, straw hat and beat the dust from it with his fist. The dust buoyed around them, refusing to return to earth. "I have faith that it will come, yes, and with it, our beloved snails."

Lila walked around the big rock, bending over and peering into every crack and crevice, every strata that held the secret of geologic time. "But where do the snails hide when they're not here, Papa? Where do they go when it's not April?"

Papa Camarena looked out over the Great Chasm, stretching his old hand against the azure expanse of the sky. "I believe they come from the river."

"The river at the bottom of the chasm?"

"Yes. I believe the snails are taken through the mist that rises from the river into the clouds, and that's why the clouds turn gray. When they become so heavy with snails, the rains come, and down with it, the snails. Emilio gathered them all to the rock where they wait to be taken up by the rainbow."

"So you believe what Daniel Castro says about the purple

stripe in the rainbow?"

"I do. How else would the snails get back to the river?"

Lila thought about all her father had revealed to her, more than he had ever told her in her entire twelve years. She thought about blessings and scarifice, and everything the town would lose should the rains fail to come again. "Papa," she concluded, "we must offer a sacrifice to the Great Chasm, so the snails return to the rock."

"And what would that sacrifice be?" asked her father, amused by the tender thoughts running through his child's inquisitive, young mind.

Lila shrugged her small shoulders. "I don't know. Something. Maybe if we think real hard we can think of the perfect thing."

Papa Camarena held out his hand to his daughter. "Such thinking requires food. Come, it's almost supper time and your mother will be waiting."

The pair shuffled the mile long journey home where a meal of pozole and tortillas sat cooling on the dinner table. Mama ladled out the thick pork and hominy soup and turned tortillas on the comal, making sure the basket warming them never emptied. The trio ate until their bellies swelled and the haze of contentment filled their beings.

That evening in her room, Lila took Boo from her toy chest and smoothed down the nap about its ears and bobbed tail. She spit on her fingers and shined up his glass eyes so that they glimmered as brightly as the April moon that shone through her dormer window. Then she waited until every light in the house fell dim, stuffed a small pillow in the seat of her pajamas, and climber out the window onto the roof, shimmying on her woolen underwear until her small body toppled from the low sloping eaves. She landed on the ground with a muffled plop, Boo the Bear crushed beneath the weight of her padded behind.

"Oh, sorry Boo," Lila apologized as she re-fluffed the bear's compacted body and deposited a loving smack upon its black yarn nose. She tucked the toy safely in the crook of her arm and headed past her father's tool shed toward the ancient dirt

road that led to the Great Chasm.

The moon was so high and so bright it was as though Lila walked beneath her own spotlight. The cool rays illuminated her every step, highlighting where she had been as well as where she was going. She felt honored by the company, and more certain with each passing moment that the sacrifice she was about to make was the right one. It took her almost an hour to reach her destination, the moonlight filling the colossal ravine so that light beams splayed from it like a blossoming beacon, a giant's bowl filled with a million fireflies whose thoraxes of light reached out and ferried her to them. Lila stopped at the sandstone boulder and ran her small hand over its granulated surface, smiling as the image of it covered with snails consumed her little mind. She held out Boo the Bear to the rock and began a formal introduction.

"Boo, this is the snail rock. Snail rock, this is Boo."

Lila tilted the animal's head downward in curtsy.

"Soon, it will start to rain and Emilio will lead his friends back to the rock," whispered in Boo's ear. "And you will be the town hero. I promise. And remember, I will always love you."

Lila took Boo to the edge of the Great chasm. She walked to its very brink, still bathed in the protective rays of the moon. She peered over and into its recesses, where she could see no bottom. Then, in one swift movement, she brought the bear to her face and kissed it lovingly. She then tossed the stuffed animal up into the air in front of her and watched him spiral downward into the yawning maw of earth.

It seemed Boo was airborne for an eternity. Her eyes followed his descent a moment, two moments, forever and he was still falling. The first wet drop hit the top of her head as she leaned dangerously forward to keep Boo in her line of vision. Before she could straighten up it was pouring, the color of the rain apparent even in the jaded light of the moon. Purple. Lila shouted and turned to the rock.

"It worked! It worked!"

And it was as though the rock shouted back, for it was overrun with snails of every size, the largest one called Emilio

perched on top, every antenna, hundreds of them, bent sharply eastward. Lila gasped. Recognition dawned. She didn't even have time to scream as the rain-soaked ground gave way beneath her and she plunged feet first into the abyss.

At that very moment, Papa Camarena bolted upright in bed. He heard the rain against the roof and shook his wife awake.

"Mama, Mama," he cried, "the rains have come back. Our town has been blessed again."

He scrambled out of bed to tell his daughter of the momentous news, looking forward to seeing the beautiful expression on her face when he told her of the snails' certain return. Papa crossed the hallway to her room and grasped the crystal doorknob in his hand, then suddenly decided not to wake his sweet child. Good news can always wait until morning, he thought. He turned and padded back to his room, to his wife, to his warm bed, with the sounds of the purple rain cascading all around him, and he made a mental note to offer something to the Great Chasm in thanks. He would leave the choice up to his daughter. Lila liked doing that sort of thing.

Laundry

The Laundromat over near Gabriel Park greets the customer with an enormous laminated folding table. The table is an island, a sanctuary, amid steep banks of Washomatics and overflowing hampers set along the floor. So much optimism in the clean plane of the folding table. The promise of mitered sheets and underwear folded like envelopes. The idea of a task with a definite ending takes the crick from my back.

The reality, though, of hauling one after another odd-shaped laundry baskets from my mini-van, flattening five dollar bills and wrestling them into the change machine, and timing the loads so I might experience a fluid procession from the washing machine to dryer and from dryer to folding, instantly negates the kindness of that laminated island. With a groan, I set to work.

My third week with no dryer, the offending thermostat on back-order, and after a couple of weeks draping clothes over the arms of sofas, over the baby's highchair, rotating boxer shorts on and off the African mask hanging on my living room wall, I'd had enough. And, being that it was late November, of course we all wore denim.

First, Sam's hamper, the collapsible, wire-framed tube from IKEA, heavy with towels and jeans way too big for him because he's fourteen and has to sag. And my little Carson's wicker hamper, an overgrown latte cup brimming with smells. Carson, who is in the early stages of potty training. Maggie, so careful about her skin and hair these days, is not careful about peeling clothes off piece by piece. Her plastic laundry basket is tangled with twisted tee shirts and panties and socks inside trousers.

Then there's my husband, the Carhartts and wool socks king. He's at the demolition stage of a remodel: asbestos and lead, and I feel I should be wearing an abatement mask just removing his clothes from the sealed cube that contains them.

My dirty laundry is sequestered in its own container, a canvas bag cinched tight with rope. And don't get me started on the linens.

It's Thanksgiving Day, and I am indeed thankful that the Laundromat is pretty near empty. One guy is cramming clean clothes into a drab stuff sack, the kind you put a tent in. I wonder about him. His stooped shoulders, quick hands, and the stubborn way he ignores me when I say "Hi."

He's divorced, I've decided. Recently. His wife has custody of the kids and he's been invited to a friend's house for today's meal, but really, he'd rather be back in his old home, last year, watching the football game while his wife bastes the turkey, snaps the string beans and nags him to get off his lazy ass and peel some potatoes.

I watch him load the stuff sack into the trunk of his hatchback. I watch him pause to light a cigarette before opening the driver's door and folding himself into his Toyota. I'm lifting the towel hamper out of my car as he drives off, and I hear the sports station from his radio. An enthusiastic announcer. There's either been a touchdown or an interception. A towel falls out of my hamper and onto the wet concrete of the parking lot. Did I mention that it's raining? It will be hours before I'm done.

There is one other woman in the Laundromat. A woman perhaps my mother's age, and she's just finished loading her machine. She plinks her quarters into the slots and one, two, three pushes the metal slides. Bad planning, I think, because all the washing will be finished at the same time. I'll catch up to her and we'll be vying for the little carts and sharing space on the folding table.

I smile a hello at the woman, and she says, "I have to go to the 7-eleven for whipped cream, can you watch my things?"

"Oh yes, no problem," I tell her, noticing that she takes her detergent with her anyway.

The trouble I have with this Aegean task is the trouble I have with my life, lately. And that trouble is my addiction to certain aspects of it. Six loads of laundry on Thanksgiving Day. Six! But my addiction isn't to the work; it's to the illusion of

how relieved I will be when it's over.

My husband asked me if I wanted him to come help.

"No!" I said too adamantly. "I need you to monitor the turkey, take out the sweet potatoes, and put in the stuffing. I need you at home. I'll deal with the laundry."

"You're not going to fold it and all that, are you?" he asked.

I looked at him horror-stricken. "What is the purpose of washing clothes if you just wad them up when they're done?" This anal lament was only half-truth. More important (and secret) is how the act of folding soft, cotton shirts belonging to your little girl or boy, or even your big boy, has something in common with rocking a baby to sleep.

As I dropped each of the baby's socks, onesies, overalls, sweatshirts and pajams into the top-loader, I thought about why I didn't want Duane to help me. It had been a generous offer, and I think he was hurt when I rejected it.

Here are the reasons, as they occur to me: first, I've become a divide and conquer gal. I've become adept at allocation, and Thanksgiving is certainly a good day to dole out tasks. Second, I'm a control freak. I know how over-used that sounds, but it fits in the case of laundry, particularly in the Laundromat, where choreography is everything. I'm not that controlling when my washer and dryer works, in fact Sam and Maggie have been washing their own clothes for a couple years, but maybe that's why the dryer's on the blink.

The third reason is uglier. It has to do with solitude and feeling guilty for craving it. Thanksgiving is traditionally the day mom gets up at dawn and prepares, painstakingly and voluminously, the feast. My own mother had a pre-sunrise ritual of pulling the tendons from our semi-frozen birds with pliers. Many a Thanksgiving morning found a bathrobe-clad mother on the kitchen floor after a stubborn drumstick finally, and suddenly, let go of its sinewy tendon. My mother's feasts were attractive, tasty, huge and steaming when they reached the table. Last year I attempted a feast of my mother's caliber. I hefted a sixteen pound turkey into a Rubbermaid tub filled with brine where it

soaked for six hours before roasting. I created side dishes gleaned from the pages of Martha Stewart. This year, I've ordered my family's Thanksgiving precooked from Natures. Duane and the kids are home reheating various plastic containers and Zip-loc baggies, turkey included. I'm doing laundry because I want to know what it's like to walk into my house with a meal on its way to the table, and I want two hours of quiet times, just me and the clothes swishing, spinning and clunking their way to cleanliness. Before I go home to break bread with my loving family, I will fold the towels into even-edged squares, and nest the corners of all the fitted sheets exactly, producing a regimented stack that will fit uniformly into our single linen closet. It is a job, unlike the amorphous nature of meal preparation, with a beginning, middle and end.

I wasn't always a laundry Nazi. I used to, in fact, honor all that was laissez-faire about the chore. Growing up, we had a ousekeeper, and I took for granted the rolls of socks and stacks of shirts that magically appeared in my dresser drawers. As a college student, I didn't know about separating lights and darks and stain removal. I learned the hard way, like boys, wearing pink clothes that should have been white for half a smemester. By the time I was a young bride though, I knew from Tide and Bounce and All-Tempa-Cheer.

My first husband, Frank, came from a family who took laundry seriously. Frank's father, also named Frank, grew up with six sisters who made sure he had three shirts every day for his job as an A&P produce manager. When franks Sr. married, that job fell to his mother-in-law for a time, then his wife, and then, ocasionally, his daughter. When I met Frank, the son, he had a peculiar habit of folding the cuffs of his button-down shirts three times, and obsessing about where they rested on his forearms. I found out later, it was because for a rather small guy, Frank had very long arms, and sirts that fit his torso usually came up short in the sleeve.

The morning of the day my first husband died, his shirts had been an issue. In fact, the last conversation we were ever to have, had been about laundry. I was nine months pregnant with

maggie, and Sam was an eighteen-month-old toddler. We had just moved to a little cabin in the woods of Monroe, New York, on a private, dead-end road across the street from an ashram. The cabin did not have, among other things, plumbing for laundry facilities. Every few days I carted our clothes off to one of two Laundromats in the town of Monroe. June 26, 1988, had been one of those days. It was the middle of an intense heat wave, and the thought of sitting in a Laundromat for an entire Sunday afternoon was not my idea of a good time. So I chose to take only one load that day, only the necessaries, which did not include Frank's shirts with extra long sleeves.

"Where's my thirty-four, thirty-fives?" Frank asked the next morning. "I am going down to Jersey to close this big deal. I can't roll my sleeves up for this one."

I lumbered over to the closet- my big belly pulling my spine forward- where frank was pawing through the collection of unacceptable shirts, his hands working furiously, as though through a file cabinet, looking for that elusive, desired object, in this case, a shirt.

"I have an idea," I told him, grabbing the desired item from the clump of dirty clothes on the closet floor. "Give me ten minutes."

The hot weather had nullified any attempt, be it roll on or spray on, to tame the persperation that had yellowed and flavored the underarm of Frank's shirt. For my birthday, two weeks earlier, someone had given me patchouli oil, and I now dabbed some of it on the offensive cotton-blend material. The yellow dried sweat became gold, and Frank's shirt now smelled like a crowd at a Grateful Dead show.

"Five more minutes," I said, making my voice sound as confident as a CEO. I took out the ironing board and slid it to an open position in front of the only outlet in the living room. Frank stood helpless in his underwear. At one point he picked up our son, Sam, and told him what a great mommy he had. Told him that daddy had a very important day today, and that when he came home, he'd bring us all a treat.

As I kissed him good-bye (my attempts at steaming the

patchouli smell out of his shirt completely backfiring--causing instead the patchouli to let loose in the heat activation rule that, I later found out, was observed by anyone practicing aroma therapy—and causing Frank to go back to plan A: a clean, ill-fitting shirt) he said, "No big deal, Suzy. See you later." And then, with his familiar flat-footed, toe-out gait, he walked away from me.

Sudden death rarely affords more than this type of farewell: a banal, every-dayish peck on the cheek; an exchange steeped in triviality.

When the coroner asked, two days later, if I wanted Frank's clothes back, warning me of the stains, I said no. And when the mortician asked me for clothes that would outlast the flesh and bones of the father of my children, I brought a 34/35 sleeve shirt, trousers and his best jacket. These, by some miracle, had been dry cleaned and pressed.

Then there came the question of what I would wear to the funeral. My maternity wardrobe consisted of stretch shorts, smocks and sundresses, the casual clothes of the happily pregnant. I only had one clean dress—-white gauzy material with tiny yellow flowers at the bodice. I sat upon the dirty pile of our clothes, Frank's and mine, my arms wrapped around my small son. Sam reached a hand up to touch the moistness of my cheek, amused by the texture of wet skin. I fell backward on the pile of clothes, my stomach a mountain between my breasts and crotch, "Mommy needs a big, black dress," I told Sam as his fingers traced the tears that had found their way to my ear canal. He moved away from my head for a minute, and pulled the patchouli-scented shirt Frank hadn't ended up wearing out from under my arm, then he wiped the corner of my face, no doubt imitating what he'd seen me do to his own face many times.

A year earlier, we'd lived for a time in my grandmother's attic. My grandmother was an Austrian immigrant, a very traditional European woman, proud of her thrift, her Hummel collection, and the hold she had on her son, my father.

Oma never owned a dryer. The cellar of her large home

was redolent with earth and Wisk. During the six months Frank, Sam and I lived with her, laundry occupied a good part of my day. The cellar was strung back and forth with wire and clothes pins, and because every square inch counted with Oma, the taut wires were only a hand's width apart. In February the clothes were barely dry before the next washing; rows of stiff cloth standing before me, wanly illuminated by 25-watt bulbs.

Finally, the weather turned warm enough to hang laundry in the backyard. There was a quince tree back there, and a blue spruce, and between deciduous and conifer posts, on a long, white line, I pegged my wash. Oma showed me the correct way to dry clothes on an outside line, upside-down in the case of shirts, so the breeze could better access the cloth, and jeans from the back of the waistband only. "Check the folds for bees," she warned from her webbed folding chair as I plucked dry clothes and sheets from the line.

My duties gradually grew to include mopping and waxing the kitchen floor, planting geraniums, and cutting coupons from the endless junk mail that sat stacked on the table in the kitchen. At least once a week Oma presented me with a long list of specific items I was to obtain from various merchants around town. Invariably, I'd return home with the wrong thing. When one of the two grocery stores had a sale on Wisk, I was instructed to purchase five bottles. The fatal mistake came the day I returned home with a new product, Surf, thinking the low introductory price would merit an edited shopping list. I know the folly of this now, the error of coming between a frau and her favorite detergent.

Thirteen years later, some things have changed. I am not the good wife I was when I was married to Frank. I am not the dutiful granddaughter. But I've grown to respect the seriousness of laundry. The intimacy of laundry.

My first husband was a briefs guy. He had an enormous penis. When I met him in college, there was a girl who'd slept with him the semester before, and she called him Frank the Impaler. Looking back, I think it's ironic that he would have chosen restrictive underwear, but now that I'm really engaging

my memory, in college, he didn't wear underwear. You always knew on which side he dressed. I must admit I've been averting my eyes more and more when Sam stumbles out of bed in the morning, everything sticking out all over the place. I don't want to know if he's a chip off the old block, and washing his underwear has even become a tad uncomfortable.

The whites were dry before the other loads, but matching all those socks was my downfall, so I dried a partial load of baby clothes, a fifteen minute batch, to get me folding sooner. It's amazing how quickly the time management of multiple loads clicks back into place. There was a time, eight years ago, when Duane and I first moved in together, that I'd schlepped clothes to the Laundromat for a year. We rented a hundred-year-old farmhouse that, in the three years we lived there, gradually fell apart around us. There were only four of us then, and no teenagers, so the activity wasn't as time consuming, but still, to be done well, required practice. Maggie was in half-day kindergarten, so laundry day commenced after the school bus picked the kids up. I drove the nine miles to one of the bigger, nicer Laundromats in town, and managed to arrive home in time to greet the kindergarten school bus.

What this is about, is fluid multi-tasking. An ability to pluck dry items from a moving dryer while leaving towels, jeans, and heavy cotton sleepers, without giving up a second of drum-turning. When I'm really good, the towels never rest, centrifugal force keeps them in motion while my hand opens, plucks, slams and pushes the On button.

After a year at the farmhouse, we were granted permission by the landlord to plumb in a water pipe and hook-ups out on the open back porch. Duane ran a 220 electric line, also. Since our hot water was heated in a miniscule five gallon hot water tank under a kitchen cabinet, I could only wash our clothes in cold water. In winter, the clothes were sculpted into frozen waves of cloth, stiff enough to use as weapons, should the need arise. It was simpler and more comfortable sometimes to just go back to the Laundromat.

Of the fifteen houses I have lived in as an adult, only four

had adequate laundry facilities. By adequate I mean no flooded basements to traverse, or frozen tundra to cross in order to achieve the end. Our situation now, even when the dryer is functioning, is sub-par. The curved, wooden steps to the basement are not completely attached to the wall and often I find myself pulling the entire flight up toward my feet when I'm too zealous with the one-by-two handrail. Anyone taller than I am (both Duane and Sam at this point) will bump his head at the bottom of the stairs and again on the duct work on the way to the washing machine if he forgets to duck. I often skin my knuckles rounding the corner at the top of the stairs because the opening is barely wide enough for a laundry basket. During Oregon's generous rainy season (November through May) you might be wise to slip on galoshes before heading down the stairs. Sam's new chore this winter is siphoning the water off the basement floor twice a day with the help of a manual sump pump. This he does with calm irony, plugging his nose and descending the stairs with one arm high above his head. "If I'm not back in twenty minutes," he says, "send the Coast Guard."

One and a half hours into my laundry sojourn, on the large clean surface of the folding table, I had neat stacks of clothes and a jumbled mess of socks. It always comes down to the socks, doesn't it? There are pages of homemaking parody regarding the vanishing sock. I don't even save them anymore. Like Noah, my rule is pairs only in the Ark. Singles go directly into the trash. It took me years to achieve this authority, my Austrian grandmother's Schimpfen in my head, "When I was a girl, I darned my stockings until I walked only on the darning."

You can't darn today's socks, not the ones I buy at Target anyway, six pair for ten dollars. You can't buy condoms as cheap as that. The holes begin almost immediately. A friend of mine has this anecdote about her husband, when he was a teenager. She says his masturbatory receptacle of choice was a sock. He refers to it now, as an adult, as his adolescent spank sock. "The same sock?" I ask my friend, incredulous. She shrugs. My son's

socks, after a couple washings, have the barest of threads on the heel, tiny moth-type holes on the toe. "Was it, like, a ski sock?" I ask my friend.

Unlike my husband, I segregate articles of clothing. When he does his occasional load of laundry, Duane stacks Carson's shirts on top of my jeans on top of his jeans on top of pillow cases and so on, in a conglomerate tower of cloth. In my early days, I may have built similar monuments of disorganized apparel, but now it's shirts with shirts, shorts with shorts, each person with his own stack. I blame my Catholic upbringing: the uniforms of parochial school, the girls' side and the boys' side of the blacktop, the Novenas before confirmation, where we lined up according to sex and size.

The woman who went to 7-eleven comes back, her clothes long-since spun. I nod at her, smile. Both laundry carts are filled with my stuff, and she eyes them for a minute, deciding whether or not to ask me for the use of one. Because it's Thanksgiving, and because it's just the two of us in the Laundromat and the deep, competitive style with which I attend public clothes washing has abated, I offer to heap my clothes together and let her use one of the carts. I even give her the good cart, the one without the squeaky wheel.

"Looks like you got an army there," says the woman.

"Looks like," I agree, noticing for the first time that nearly every washable item in my house is represented in this Malay of laundry.

This was not the first time I'd been in this particular Laundromat. I'd had a brief, torrid relationship with the Gabriel Park Laundromat which began a year-and-a-half earlier, the first spring in our present house. May first, to be exact, the year 2000. Perhaps the second worst day of my life. This was the day Maggie, with the kind of thick hair most grown women would kill for, was sent home from school infested with lice.

She'd had a rash on her neck for about a week, but I assumed it was a reaction to a new brand of shampoo. Maggie and Sam had avoided two earlier lice outbreaks in their school

career, and we'd not heard of any recent plagues. School policy was adamant: no nits, no bugs, and it was up to me to fumigate Maggie's scalp with a poison so toxic pregnant women were prevented from using it.

Carson, who'd just turned one, was learning to walk and you couldn't turn your back on him for a second. Sam was at soccer practice, and Duane and I had had one of our common (at that point in our marriage) fights, so he was out taking a walk. I strapped Carson into his umbrella stroller and set him at the base of the back porch stairs, then sat Maggie down on a stair in front of me, her wet, poisonous tresses, riddled with six-legged vermin, trailed down the length of her back.

Section by tiny section I combed and nit-picked. If you've ever wondered about that cliché, I'm here to tell you, it's apt. Lice eggs are as sticky as wet buggers, but smaller than poppy seeds, and often while sliding one off a strand of hair you'll lose track of it as it latches onto a different strand, playing doe-see-doe while you curse and sigh. Maggie had been sent home with a special lice comb, a metal fine-toothed gadget with long, nasty tines. She sobbed, wincing as I yanked through her hair. Carson wriggled and screamed, wanting me to pull the lice comb along his fine-haired baby head as well.

After twenty minutes of this torture, not even the tip of the iceberg, Duane came rushing through the back gate, his usual laid-back style subverted, his eyes wide and wet, "It's Selma, she's just been hit!" he said.

I jumped up from the stair, the lice comb sailed through the air and landed at the base of the stroller sending Carson into fits of frustration as he tried to reach it.

"I don't know if she's still alive, the guy who hit her is out there, I need a board, she may have broken her back!"

Selma, our fabulous calico, had seen Duane coming back toward the house, and being the type of cat who aligned with the affectionate gestures usually only displayed by dogs, she'd run out into the road to greet him. She was still alive, but barely. Duane rushed her to the vet and the X-Ray showed her spine and urethra had been severed. While Duane described our gruesome

options to me over the phone, Selma, who never came out of shock, bled to death. While trying to comfort my husband, I noticed a rather large louse doing a rope climb up a loose piece of my hair.

As if the delousing and the dead cat weren't enough, I had a mandate to vacuum thoroughly and wash every fabric in the house. After four hours picking through Maggie's scalp, my own head saturated with poison and covered with a gallon Zip-loc baggie, I stuffed all clothing, bedding and throw rugs in Hefty sacks, and headed off to my sanctuary. Unfortunately, I missed the last load rule by fifteen minutes, so back home I drove, parked my contaminated car on the street, and announced that the next day would be a day off from school. We slept under seldom-used tablecloths, our pillows encased in tall kitchen garbage bags.

It took three weeks and several trips to the Laundromat to completely banish the lice and the nasty little nits. Poor Maggie was sent home a few times; at one point the school nurse insinuated I might need social service help. "What doesn't kill you," I always tell my kids, "makes a great story." Maggie, a year-and-a-half later, still fails to see the amusement.

When I arrived home, leaving the containers of gloriously clean clothes in the car, because, how far can you truly go with anal-compulsion on Thanksgiving Day, my house smelled of reheated food, and the family was busy with candle lighting and turkey carving. True, we were all wearing our clothes of last resort, torn Wife-beaters, sweatshirts emblazoned with Disney characters, and bleach-stained blue jeans, but it was us, the highly imperfect Graham-Vitellos, gathered around the slab of cedar that functions as our dining room table, giving thanks, once again.

Profiles

Dayna Gulino spends her days as an English and History double-major at Mount Saint Mary's College. She has an unhealthy attachment to her 1993 Ford Thunderbird SC and hopes to one day have enough money to open a 150-acre Basset Hound Sanctuary in Colorado. Dayna would like to be a novelist, but wouldn't mind being a circus clown.

Jessica LaGrange is a senior Liberal Arts major. Master procrastinator and lover of haiku, she is known as The Kicker of Elves. She is also known as The Angel Crusher. In her spare time, Jessica enjoys browsing the internet and driving Sparky with The D.

Jacqueline Lopez, a self proclaimed radical, is a second year Art student at the Mount. Her perpetual countenance can only be described as, "Get the hell out of my face." She enjoys listening to The Doors and Pink Floyd. Oh yeah, and she loves her dog, Nacho.

Maria Ochoa is severely in debt, and is seriously considering changing her identity after college. She belongs to the "Dark Side," also known as the English Department. When not acting out wild tales for her friends, Maria is a proud member of Latinas Unidas. She will be studying in Florence next semester.

Amanda Prince has abandoned her friends to spend her last semester of school studying in Ireland. She is an English major, who hopes to pass her final math class. Amanda would like to write Bono articles for *The Enquirer*.

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Elizabeth Austen is a poet, performer, and teacher. She has performed her poems at On the Board's "12 Minute Max," the Seattle Poetry Festival, Elliot Bay Books, Richard Hugo House, Open Books and other Seattle venues. Elizabeth teaches the performance

of poetry at Hugo House, and is also associate producer for literary programming at KUOW. 94.9, public radio, where she collaborates on the development and production of programming that celebrates the literary arts. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing at Anticoh University, Los Angeles, and her poems have appeared in Carapace, CRUX, Vox Populi, and Poets West.

Dr. Katherine Brueck is Professor of English at Mount Saint Mary's College. She has published her sonnets in many journals including Christian Poetry Review, Troubadour, and SPSM&H:Amelia. She is author of The Redemption of Tragedy (State University of New York Press, 1995).

Larry Burns is a graduate of the Mount Saint Mary's Weekend College.

Nilsia Cadena does tarot card readings and is a Democrat.

John Randolph Carter is a poet from Los Alimitos, California.

Janyse Dela Cruz is a writer, poet, and sage...I live a simple existence, so instead of boring you with trivial minutia, I'd like to give thanks to all the important influences in my life: God who is the foundation that keeps me upright, my friends and mentors who are the walls that support me, and my family who is the roof that completes me. Much love and aloha to all...

Maureen Kelly is a junior Liberal Studies major at Mount Saint Mary's College. Her favorite authors are Steinbeck, Amy Tan, and James Herriot. She lives in Camarillo, California.

Rachel Manheimer's muse is short and sweet and kicks hard. She tries very hard to make a living as a theatrical stage manager in Los Angeles.

Lynn Tanner lives and works in the San Fernando Vallery.

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